

**Mental Health in Canadian Agriculture
Ontario Egg Farmers Presentation Summary
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Background:

Even during relative times of calm, producers experience a wide range of occupational stresses, many of which are beyond their control. These stressors include: changing climate, changing government, changing regulations, disease, weather, significant financial burdens, and succession planning. Several studies worldwide have shown that producers have higher levels of psychological distress than the general population, and have elevated rates of suicide compared to other occupations.

These issues are even more severe during times of agricultural emergency. For example, the psychological impacts of the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak in the UK and Netherlands in 2001 included post-traumatic stress. This was characterized in some by flashbacks and nightmares, and feelings of complete loss of autonomy, helplessness, guilt, anger and grief.

What makes the seriousness of the psychological distress even more alarming is the relative lack and uptake of appropriate mental health resources. Even in the aftermath of the FMD outbreak in the UK, only 1.5% of producers sought professional help. Producers who did seek help first turned to family and friends – many of whom were struggling themselves – and then to their veterinarians and agricultural support staff. But sadly, many of veterinarians and agricultural support staff felt unqualified and ill-prepared to provide the assistance being sought.

Until very recently, there was an unfortunate lack of published knowledge on the mental health of Canadian farmers. It was this reality that led to the national survey on Agricultural Producer Stress and Resilience, conducted by Andria Jones-Bitton and colleagues from the University of Guelph (September 2015 to January 2016). Responses were obtained from 1132 producers across Canada. Presented here are preliminary results from that survey; statistical analyses to identify risk factors and potential associations with demographic, lifestyle, employment characteristics, etc. are on-going.

Perceived Stress

Stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale, a validated self-report scale widely used in the literature. Approximately 45% of our surveyed producers were classified in the *high* stress category. The word stress is commonly used, perhaps to an extent where its seriousness is negated. It should be noted that stress is closely associated with poor health practices,

procrastination, decreased life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, increased illness, increased risk of heart disease, and higher death rates.

Anxiety & Depression

Anxiety and depression were measured using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, a validated self-report scale widely used in the literature. More than half of surveyed producers met the scale definition for “anxiety caseness”; specifically, 25% were classified as mild, 25% as moderate, and 8% as severe levels of anxiety.

Over one-third of producers met the scale definition for “depression caseness”, with 20% of cases as mild, 12% as moderate, and 3% as severe.

Both the anxiety and depression scores, and prevalence of anxiety and depression, were higher than the general population norms for the scales and the results from previous producer studies in the UK and Norway that used the same scale.

Burnout

We measured burnout using the validated Maslach Burnout Inventory. This scale has 3 sub-scales: professional efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism. More than half of producers scored high on professional efficacy, meaning they had high expectations for continued effectiveness at work. Approximately 1 in 5 producers had low professional efficacy. Unfortunately, one-third of producers scored high in emotional exhaustion, and 2 in 5 producers scored high in cynicism. Hence, surveyed producers scored high in two of the three components of burnout. Burnout can impact wellbeing, productivity, job retention, and production.

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity or challenge. We measured resilience using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, a validated and widely used scale. Roughly two-thirds of producers had levels of resilience that were lower than that of the United States general population. Resilience can protect against depression, anxiety, stress, and suicide. Fortunately, resilience is also something that can be practiced and learned.

Help-Seeking & Satisfaction with Industry Support

Surveyed producers had favourable attitudes towards help for mental health. Over two-thirds of producers indicated that seeing a mental health professional can be helpful, that they would seek professional help if they were worried or upset for a long period of time, and that seeking professional help did not make them a weak person. Unfortunately, perceived stigma remains an issue: 40% of producers said that they would feel uneasy seeking professional help because

of what other people might think, and one-third said that seeking such help can stigmatize a person's life.

Level of satisfaction with industry support for mental health was sought; among Canadian dairy cattle, beef, sheep, goats, poultry and pork industries, just 12% to 60% of producers indicated being satisfied or very satisfied current industry supports. Hence, there is considerable room for improvement in producer mental health support in Canada's livestock industries.

Summary

Our Canadian producers showed high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism, as well as low levels of resilience. They also expressed positive attitudes towards help-seeking, and low levels of satisfaction with current industry support.

Together, we can do more to address the issues facing our producers.

Future Directions

Phase 2 of our research began in Spring 2017. Funding support has been obtained from the OMAFRA-University of Guelph Emergency Management Program, Egg Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Pork, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency, and the Canadian Animal Health Coalition for a 3-year research project to help build mental health capacity among the agricultural community. Briefly, the planned projects will result in the development of:

1. A **Mental Health Literacy program**, specifically tailored for agriculture, that would increase participants' knowledge of common mental health conditions, teach them how to talk about these issues and provide reassurance, teach them how to bridge people to support, and increase their confidence in doing these things.

2. A **Mental Health Emergency Response model**, to allow for rapid and effective response to mental health issues during agricultural emergency so we can help limit the impacts on producer mental health and their farms, to promote recovery and restoration of both.

To do this, we are using widespread stakeholder engagement – it is not enough for academics, or government, or industry, or mental health workers, to go this alone. Our power comes from collaboration and building on each other's strengths.

In addition to helping our producers who are struggling, our collective action will better equip producers, veterinarians, and agricultural workers to support those experiencing mental distress, whilst also helping maintain their own wellness, and thus, contribute to a stronger agricultural sector.